

THE PAPER CAPER

BY CAROLINE B. COONEY
ILLUSTRATED BY GAIL OWENS



“Do you think it will be restful at Uncle Steve’s?” asks Lynn.

“Not with you around,” says her father, and he’s right. Lynn has a gift for getting into trouble, often dragging her quiet twin Victoria with her.

This time the trouble starts with Uncle Steve’s computer. He’s working on a program that will help the *Nearing River Daily News* keep track of all the papers it sells, but someone steals the program just before it is to be installed. Lynn’s experience with a paper route, together with what she’s picked up from Uncle Steve about reading computers, gives her a clue to who stole the program and why, but her knowledge turns out to be dangerous.

This lively adventure will delight readers who enjoyed the earlier escapades of Lynn and Victoria in *Safe as the Grave*, as well as those who are meeting them for the first time.



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BY CAROLINE B. COONEY
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COWARD, McCANN & GEOGHEGAN
NEW YORK



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Lynn hated laundry. *She* liked to wear dirty clothes. Why couldn't the rest of the family? Three baskets jammed with soggy, clean clothes. "Please let's use the dryer," begged Lynn.

"On a beautiful sunny day?" said her mother. "Nonsense, Lynn. Hang them outdoors on the line. That's your chore."

Lynn's twin sister, Victoria, had been invited to Suzie Walker's birthday party, but Lynn hadn't. It wasn't fair. Anyone knew twins had to go places together. And Lynn not only had to miss the games and the prizes and the food—she had to do chores. Laundry. *Clean* laundry.

One by one Lynn dragged the baskets outside. Tied to hooks screwed to the house were two long ropes. They sagged across the side yard to a big oak tree. Last year Lynn had tried to tightrope walk on the clothesline. She got two scraped knees and a spanking for ripping the hooks out of the house wall. Lynn had hard feelings toward that clothesline. Besides, she liked her blue jeans soft and dirty, not stiff and clean.

“That Suzie Walker had no right to ask Victoria and not me,” grumbled Lynn. She stomped her feet but no one noticed. There was plenty of traffic down below the yard on the rural county road, but the hedge of azalea bushes hid Lynn. Lynn’s mother hated the road. “All those people going by can *see* us,” she would complain.

Lynn began to laugh to herself. “I’ll hang up that laundry,” she said. “I’ll really hang it. Just wait till Suzie Walker and her mother bring Victoria home.” Mrs. Walker was very prim. She didn’t like Lynn because she thought Lynn was rowdy.

Lynn got a stool from the back porch and stood on it to adjust the clothesline at the tree side. Now instead of two ropes sagging next to each other, there was one rope tightly strung high up and the other strung right below it. The azalea bushes no longer hid the clotheslines from passing cars and trucks.

Lynn began to sort through the laundry. She took a pair of Victoria’s pink ballet tights and draped them over the top line for arms. She hung her mother’s red bra over them. She fastened the green-striped lace bikini panties with clothespins and another pair of tights for legs. It made a pretty good person. Mrs. Walker wouldn’t like it one bit. Lynn bet anything that all Mrs. Walker’s laundry was white.

Lynn took a pale beige sheet and turned it into a ballooning fat lady, stuffing it into a bra and girdle and plumping its muslin stomach carefully. She gave it a pair of her father’s tennis socks. Next to the fat lady, she tied

several socks in knots to make a hangman's noose. She dressed a white towel person in her father's navy and white polka-dotted undershirt and pinned on his tiger-striped undershorts. She added yellow sock hands and feet. The body needed a face so Lynn balled up socks and clothespinned them on for eyes. The towel person hung sadly from his sock rope.

Next Lynn made a ladder of bras for a seriously deformed lady. Her mother's lacy summer nightgowns were pinned into a silky train. Lynn climbed the tree to hang them extra high.

People began to wave at Lynn from the road. She waved back. A trucker blew his horn. One woman looked out her window and laughed, and the next driver looked out and frowned.

Lynn and Victoria were going to spend the summer with Uncle Steve and Aunt Camilla. Lynn was sure they were the types to look out their car windows and laugh.

She had quite a lot of laundry left over. Oh well. She lugged the clothes to the back porch and stuffed them in the dryer. Mother would never know. Then Lynn went into the kitchen to get a snack. Anyone who missed a birthday party and had to hang up clean laundry deserved a treat. "Hi, Mom. What is there to eat?" said Lynn.

"Nothing. I haven't gone shopping yet."

"*Nothing?*"

"You could have a bowl of corn flakes. Or a carrot."

Victoria was at a birthday party and all Lynn got was a carrot? Lynn was glad she had hung Victoria's dress



upside-down on the line, draped perfectly so that a pair of flowered underpants would show.

“Listen to that racket,” her mother said. “What is everyone honking about? People can be so rude.”

Lynn scraped a carrot.

“You’ve been up to something, haven’t you?” said her mother suspiciously. “I can tell. Your mouth is flat from keeping the laughs inside.”

Lynn filled her mouth with carrot and crunched. “I’m pleased that I finished my chores,” she said as sweetly as she could over the carrot.

“Then why not find more happiness and pick up your room? Aunt Camilla won’t like it if you mess up *her* beautiful home that way.”

“Victoria and I will keep our bedroom door shut,” said Lynn. “Aunt Camilla will respect our privacy.” Before her mother could order her to clean the bedroom, Lynn hurried out of the house. She found her jump rope tied to the garage door handle where she had tied Victoria yesterday and forgotten about her. Lynn was just taking the last knot out of her jump rope when she heard a car in the driveway. . . . Mrs. Walker bringing Victoria home.

In the side yard, damp clothes moved gently in the summer air. The matching set of Victoria’s trousers and knit top that Lynn had stuffed with towels hung by the seat of its pants, waiting for a spanking. Lynn grinned. Through the screen windows Lynn heard her mother yell, “What? My laundry is *what?*”

Lynn ran around front to enjoy the display with

everybody else. “Hi, Vic, have a good time?” she said to her twin.

Victoria didn’t answer. Neither did anyone else. They were staring at the row of people hanging on the clothesline. Lynn’s mother made strange gurgling noises. Mrs. Walker stared at the ladder of bras: all different colors and patterns. At the bottom was a tiny pair of black panties with one red heart in the middle. Mrs. Walker looked at Lynn’s mother in horror. “Don’t you have any white underwear?” she said.

“Of course I do,” said Lynn’s mother weakly. “It just didn’t need washing.”

“Because she never wears it,” Lynn told Mrs. Walker.

Victoria said, “You might at least have put up a pair of panties for me that didn’t have a big hole in them.”

“Oh Mom, don’t take down my fat lady!” cried Lynn. “It took me ages to stuff her into her girdle.”

“I’m going to stuff you—” Lynn’s mother didn’t finish her sentence.

“You couldn’t think of anyplace terrible enough, could you?” said Victoria.

Mrs. Walker looked as if she thought the laundry was dirty and not soggy clean. She hustled Suzie into the car and they drove quickly away. “Lynn,” said her mother. “Lynn.”

“Words fail you, don’t they?” said Victoria.

Lynn’s mother said, “It wasn’t *my* fault you didn’t get asked to the party. Why did you have to hang *my* underwear out?”

“Because I didn’t have any of Mrs. Walker’s,” said Lynn reasonably.

“Will she be in terrible trouble?” said Victoria, jumping up and down. “Will Aunt Camilla and Uncle Steve say she can’t visit them after all?”

“I surely hope not,” said their mother. “I have had all the twinnery I can take this year.” She pulled on the ropes until they sagged back down behind the azalea hedge.

“She did what?” said their father.

“And furthermore,” said Victoria, “Lynn has to do all the laundry by herself until you leave for England.”

“Those awful leopard-spotted undershorts?” said her father. “The ones your aunt gave me for a joke? In public? Where people drove by and saw them?”

“They aren’t leopard-spotted,” said Lynn, “they’re tiger-striped.”

“Thank you,” said her father. “I’ll explain that to my friends.” He dropped into his old plaid recliner and stretched himself out flat to stare up at the ceiling. “England sounded good the minute we decided to travel,” said Father. “Sounds even better when you think that we’ll be going childless.”

“You could at least pretend to miss us,” said Victoria. “Six whole weeks while you’re having a wonderful time in England, I’ll be stuck with Lynn. Day after day after day after day after day after—”

“ALL RIGHT, VICTORIA!” said Father. “Peace. Silence. I want to think about how restful England will be.”

“Restful sounds so boring,” said Lynn. “Do you think it will be restful at Uncle Steve’s?”

“Not with you around,” said Father. “Lynn, please remember that Uncle Steve runs his computer business from the spare room, and Aunt Camilla runs her plant shop from the side porch. They will be very busy. You must stay out of their hair.”

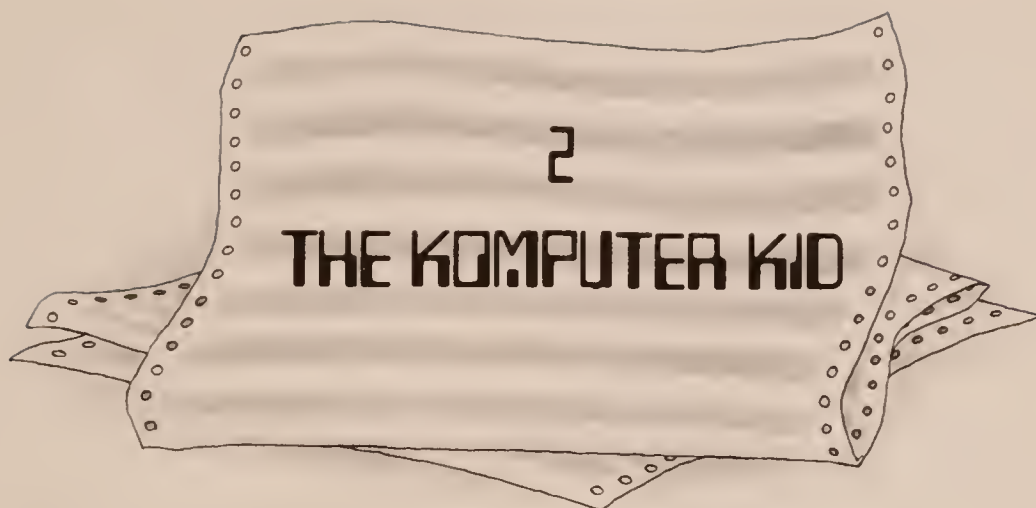
“And out of their laundry,” said Mother.

“And not shriek all the time,” said Father.

“I’ll take care of Lynn,” said Victoria. “If she’s bad, I’ll hang her by her toenails from the clothesline. Or fasten her lips together with clothespins. Or whirl her in the dryer. Or—”

“No hitting, Lynn,” said their mother.

“England,” whispered their father, “here we come. Without twins!”



By two o'clock the first day, Lynn was bored. "Aunt Camilla, there's nothing to do," she complained.

Aunt Camilla and Victoria did not know what Lynn was talking about. They were happily mixing a huge barrel of peat moss, sand, and dirt for planting houseplants in. Aunt Camilla had sterilized the dirt by baking it in her oven. The whole house stank of cooked dirt. "Don't you want to mix, Lynn?" said Aunt Camilla in astonishment.

Lynn did not think it was a treat to be up to her elbows in slime. "No," she said firmly. She walked out of the greenhouse that Aunt Camilla had built next to the side porch, ducked under the sign that read

PLANT BOUTIQUE ★ DO COME IN

and went around to the front to the door that read

GREER DATA SYSTEMS

"What are data systems?" she asked Uncle Steve.

He was sitting on an old piano stool, revolving himself in

front of a typewriter that had ballooned out in back into a swollen television screen. Uncle Steve was a large man with a very large curly dark beard. He looked too big to be crouched over the little gray machine. Its screen was filled with square green letters, numbers, and punctuation marks in peculiar places.

DIM I\$28, J\$8, it said. REM ★ ORDER ★ 28: J

“Data systems,” said her uncle, typing rapidly, “are computer filing arrangements.”

If anyone needs a filing system, thought Lynn, it’s you.

The room was littered with pieces of green and white striped computer paper. An old couch (it had been Lynn’s mother’s until Lynn and Victoria pretended it was a trampoline one day and split it open) was completely hidden by stacks of computer print-outs, magazines, and thick notebooks.

Lynn skirted around two other pieces of the computer: sleek gray machines like sculptures in the midst of Uncle Steve’s mess.

He held up a thin phonograph record, like the kind Lynn had gotten free in a cereal box last spring. “This disk,” he explained, “is where I save the program I write. It also stores the facts that make the program useful.” He swiveled on his stool. “I drop it into the disk drive and I’m ready to roll.”

“Roll where?” said Lynn. He couldn’t roll on the piano stool, because the floor was knee-deep in scrunched-up old paper.

“On a program for the *Nearing River Daily News*. It’ll

give them control over the circulation,” said Uncle Steve. “Circulation being what happens to every single paper the newspaper prints every day. About thirty thousand.”

Lynn dragged a beat-up Danish chair behind her uncle’s piano stool so she could watch the green words appearing on his screen. GOSUB, it said, GOTO. “The newspaper ought to know already where its papers are,” said Lynn, thinking this was very sloppy of the *News*.

“They don’t,” said Uncle Steve cheerfully. “And they’re paying me to figure out how to keep track. I’ve been working on the program for three months. My only problem now is Mr. Hamill. He’s the circulation manager at the paper, and he’s afraid of the computer.”

Lynn moved so she could watch Uncle Steve talk through his beard. Her mother couldn’t stand the way Uncle Steve’s mustache curled over his upper lip and puffed out when he spoke. She said, “I wouldn’t kiss through that!” Lynn asked, “Why’s Mr. Hamill afraid?”

“Lots of people think a computer will hurt them. Put them out of work. What it does is make their work easier. But if Mr. Hamill won’t try to use my program correctly, it won’t work, and everybody will be mad.”

When he stopped talking, his lips hid behind his beard again. Lynn stroked the computer. She couldn’t understand how it could take in all the facts and numbers and store them on that little disk. But then, she’d never understood how music attached itself to a record, either. “In cartoons, the computers take up whole walls and have tapes running like thruway exits,” said Lynn.



“Computers like that should be in museums.”

His computer had a little twist of Christmas tinsel tied onto the printer. “It’s July,” said Lynn. “Want me to take down your decorations?”

Uncle Steve laughed. “That’s modern science, kid. That’s progress. The tinsel is supposed to cut down on static.”

“You *paid* for that?” said Lynn.

Uncle Steve scrunched more paper and flung it on the floor. “You sure are messy,” said Lynn enviously. “I wish I could keep my room this awful.”

“The world is my wastebasket,” said Uncle Steve. “Now, Lynn, you are the kind of girl who might fool with my hardware. Don’t touch the computer unless I am here to help you run it, promise?”

Lynn took out the parts of that sentence she liked and said, “I could run the computer? Really?”

“Sure, it’s easy.”

“But I don’t understand words like GOSUB, REM, and J\$.”

“You don’t use those words. They’re part of the program, and they don’t appear on the screen when you operate it. All you have to read is plain old English.”

Lynn crouched in her Danish chair. I’ll be a Child Wonder, she thought. The Komputer Kid. President of my own company by age twelve and a millionaire by thirteen. What a life.

Before Uncle Steve could come out from under his beard

and tell her how to begin, the door banged open and a tall beaky man stormed into the cluttered office. He looked around in disgust. "Greer," he said, not bothering with a Mister, "you got it going yet? Huh?"

"Almost," said Uncle Steve. "I need another few days to get the bugs out." He forced a smile and put a hand on Lynn's shoulder. "This is my niece, Lynn. Lynn, this is Mr. Hamill, the circulation manager at the *Daily News*."

Lynn held out her hand but Mr. Hamill did not shake it. His eyes were nervously glued to the computer screen. "How do you do?" said Lynn.

Mr. Hamill ignored her. "What's all this mess on the floor?" he demanded.

"Proof that I work hard," said Uncle Steve, smiling.

Mr. Hamill snorted. "Where's the camel?" he said.

Camel? thought Lynn.

"If you mean my wife," said Uncle Steve stiffly, "Camilla is in her shop."

Aunt Camilla was very pretty, with long sleek black hair that flew in clouds around her. She'd hate a nickname like Camel.

Mr. Hamill said, "I tell my friends I work with a computer guy whose wife is a camel." He laughed hard. "Or a dromedary."

Lynn hoped Uncle Steve would be rude right back, but he only smiled under the mustache.

"You've taken long enough," said Mr. Hamill. "I want results, Greer."

"Computer programs don't write themselves," said

Uncle Steve, his beard jumping. "I'm going as fast as I can."

"It better be soon," said Mr. Hamill, "or we'll forget the whole computer idea." He stomped out of the office, slamming the door.

"Whew!" said Lynn. "How can you stand him?"

Her uncle shrugged. "If I refuse the customers I don't like, I'll just go broke."

Lynn knew that work "broke." It was what her mother said every time Lynn wanted to go to the store and buy something. Lynn and Victoria would be visiting six weeks. Wouldn't it be awful if Uncle Steve were broke the whole time? Or even part of it? She said, "Now will you show me how the computer works?"

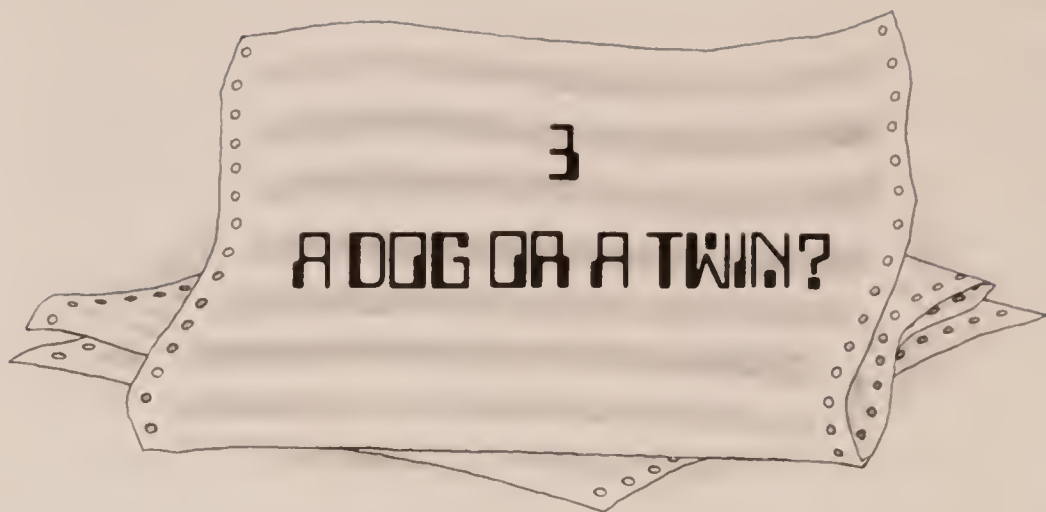
He shook his head. "I'd better get to work."

"But Uncle Steve, I don't have anything to do. And I'm bored." (All the way from England, Lynn could hear her mother saying, "Lynn, don't WHINE.") Lynn started to scuff her shoes and say she was sorry, but Uncle Steve just smiled again. "Now that I've gotten into the newspaper business, I know they always need another paperboy. Or girl. How about if I call Mr. Hamill up tomorrow and see what he's got in the way of a summer paper route?"

A paper route! thought Lynn. I'll earn money of my own and never be broke. "Do I walk?"

"Only if you can't manage my ten-speed bike," her uncle told her.

Lynn grinned. "The bike doesn't exist that I can't manage," she bragged.



“And then,” said Victoria, “I cut off little slips from the begonias to root them in sand. Soon there will be fifty more begonia plants than there were yesterday.”

“That is about as interesting as watching an ice cube freeze,” said Lynn. “Let me tell about my first day on the paper route.”

“Everybody knows what paper routes are like, Lynn,” said Victoria. “You ride your bike up the sidewalk and throw a paper on a porch. That’s about as interesting as watching your toenails grow. What I do with Aunt Camilla takes *skill*.”

“It takes skill,” said Lynn, “to stay on a man’s bike as tall as Uncle Steve’s is and not even fall off when you throw the papers.” She kept her elbows under the dinner table so Victoria wouldn’t see the scrapes from the three falls she’d had.

Aunt Camilla took pity on Lynn. “Tell us about your paper route, Lynn, dear.”

“I have ten blocks on Eastern Avenue,” said Lynn. “The

left side of the road only. Ninety-eight papers.” She didn’t tell them that ninety-eight papers weighed so much she could hardly move them. “A boy named Shad has the other side of Eastern. He told me, or yelled, really, across all the traffic, which houses had dogs to be scared of and which ones just had dogs.” Lynn liked big dogs that lumbered around their yards and slobbered on her hands. She did not like little dogs that yipped like stuck wind-up toys and attacked her heels.

“Suzie Walker’s mother said she’d rather have a litter of puppies than have *you* in her house,” said Victoria.

“Oh yeah?” said Lynn. “Well, I’d rather have a dog than a twin, so there.”

“Now, now, girls,” said Aunt Camilla. “Twins are supposed to be loving and affectionate. Lynn, what kind of name is Shad?”

Lynn almost said it was the same kind of name as Camel, but she stopped herself. “Nickname, I guess.” She helped herself to another hot roll. Aunt Camilla liked to bake bubbly casseroles with awful things like onions and mushrooms and olives in them. It was hard to get enough food to eat when you had to steer around so much guck. Lynn was eating a lot of bread. “Shad crosses Eastern Avenue all the time,” she said. “He just starts moving and the cars sort of screech to a halt for him. I told him he was a show-off and he was going to get killed, but Shad said he had to cross the street so I wouldn’t go up on the porch at number eleven hundred.”

“What was wrong with the porch?” said Victoria.

“Shad said eleven hundred had a real ghost living in it. He said he’d better help me deliver there. Victoria, if you keep eating those mushrooms and olives, something awful is going to start growing in your stomach.”

Victoria snorted and ate three olives at once. “So ghosts read the *Daily News*,” she said.

“That’s just what *I* said to Shad,” said Lynn. She was annoyed to have Victoria use her funny remark. “I said, ‘That’s the twentieth century for you, isn’t it, Shad?’ Then we both laughed so hard we fell off our bicycles.”

Lynn waited for Uncle Steve and Aunt Camilla to laugh, but they weren’t even listening. They were talking about his newspaper program. “Hamill has been so uncooperative,” said Uncle Steve. “Refusing to give me information, pretending he doesn’t have time. Yet here he is demanding to have the program finished right away.”

“Mr. Hamill is such an unpleasant man,” said Aunt Camilla. “I wish you could work with Mario Forio.”

“Who is Mario Forio?” said Lynn. “He sounds like a nursery rhyme.”

“He’s the owner of the paper,” said her uncle. “Mr. Forio is the one who decided to start using computers for the circulation system. Mr. Hamill doesn’t want it at all. It’s a bad situation.”

Lynn finished the potato parts of her casserole and drank a glass of milk to wash away the wine taste. “Tonight,” she begged, “will you show me how to run the computer?”

“You can’t even do your nine tables yet,” said Victoria. “How could you possibly program a computer?”

“She couldn’t program it,” said their uncle, “but she could operate the program after I wrote it, just the way the clerks at the newspaper will do when it’s installed. To use a program, all you have to do is read and think.”

“If you have to think,” said Victoria, “Lynn can’t do it.”

“I’m tired of you!” yelled Lynn. “I’m going to scrub the toilet with your toothbrush! I’m going to put worms in your purse and spiders in your training bra!”

Aunt Camilla shrieked. Uncle Steve groaned. “No wonder your mother and father fled to England!” they said.



“Shad!” yelled Lynn. “How come you’re not delivering your papers?”

Shad dropped his bike on the grass and darted between traffic to the girls’ side of Eastern Avenue. “I wish you wouldn’t do that,” said Lynn. “It makes me nervous.”

“Who are you, my mother?” demanded Shad.

Lynn blushed. What could be worse than sounding like somebody’s mother? “Shad, this is my twin, Victoria,” she said. “Vic’s been helping in my aunt’s plant shop but she got bored.”

“Are plants boring?” said Shad.

“No,” said Victoria, “customers are. Fuddy-duddies who can’t decide between ivy in a clay pot or ivy in a plastic pot.”

Shad held out his wrist like a flagpole and clicked his digital watch. The time blinked at them in red. “My supplier’s four minutes later than usual,” said Shad.

Lynn had never owned a watch. Her parents promised to buy her one when she started being good. So far she

hadn't started. "Nice watch," she said enviously.

"Bought it with my paper route money," said Shad. He wet his finger and polished the crystal. "What are you going to do with your money?"

"I haven't earned any yet," said Lynn. "We must not have the same supplier. My papers are already here."

"Mr. Grant's my supplier. He's got forty paperboys to deliver bundles to."

"And papergirls," said Victoria.

Shad made a face. "Whatever," he said, dismissing girls with a wave of his digital watch.

Before the twins had a chance to tell Shad not to call them whatevers, a yellow van with bubble windows pulled up where Shad had dropped his bike. "There's Mr. Grant. I bet," said Shad, "that the two of you can't deliver your ninety-eight papers as fast as I can deliver my one-hundred-eleven."

"You're on," said Lynn. Quickly she stuffed her bike sacks full. Uncle Steve's bike was just as much too big for her as it had been the other days and she wobbled dangerously. If only it didn't have that bar in the middle, she thought. And what good are ten-speeds? I can't even go ten feet without tipping! She hurled the first four newspapers while Victoria trotted at her side. Smack! Slide! Right across the porches into the front doors. Lynn was so pleased with herself she lost her balance and missed two houses before she got upright again. She swung a U-turn on somebody's lawn.

"Hey you! Girl!" bellowed the somebody. He was a fat

creep in jeans and an undershirt, waving a Pepsi threateningly. "Get off my grass, you!"

"I'm sorry," said Lynn. She threw his paper. It caught the man right on the shinbone. He yowled and threw the paper right back. Lynn ducked—and fell off.

"He's a creep," said Victoria. "Fall on his grass, Lynn, not on the cement." She carried the paper back to the creep. "We're so sorry," she said, in her sweetest Victoria voice.

"I'm sorry, too. Sorry to have girls delivering my paper."

Lynn would have spent the afternoon snarling at him, but Victoria said, "Down, dog. Shad's winning."

Ahead on the other side of Eastern Avenue, Shad was tossing his papers with practiced ease. Lynn and Victoria struggled after him. Lynn bumped down a curb at the next block and fell with a crash on the road. "You aren't hurt, are you?" said Victoria anxiously.

"Certainly not. That's ketchup all over my knee." She made a newspaper bandage, but this only smeared the blood down her leg.

"Shad's winning," said her twin glumly. "I feel like a whatever."

By the time they'd delivered their papers, Shad was lying on his back, pretending to snooze under a mulberry tree. "Those mulberries," said Victoria, "are ripe."

"I noticed that," said Lynn. Quietly they picked handfuls of berries to splatter Shad, but he'd picked his own when they were busy with the papers. They all hid behind bushes and fought a tense berry war. When everyone was

purple spotted, Shad extended his digital watch for truce and said, "It's four forty-nine. Let's hide in the park."

"What does the time have to do with the park?" Lynn asked. She licked purple off her arms.

Shad hid his bike in a clump of snowball bushes, draping the fat leaves over his fenders. Lynn tucked her bike in with Shad's.

"This park has a swimming hole," said Shad. "The ole-fashioned kind with a mud bottom. There isn't anyone to supervise after five o'clock, so they lock the gates."

"That's mean," said Victoria. "It's light till nine."

They walked past the sign wired to a tall chain-link fence:

PARK CLOSES AT FIVE P.M.

Leaving the narrow asphalt road, they wandered over thick plush green grass.

"When I grow up," confided Shad, "I'm going to be a parks superintendent and drive the tractor that pulls the lawn mowers."

"When I grow up," said Lynn, "I'm going to be a computer programmer."

Victoria and Shad stared.

"I can already work a computer," Lynn added.

"You can?" Shad was very impressed. Victoria was not.

"Sure," said Lynn. "We own one ourselves, you know."

Shad gasped. Stick that in your digital watch, thought Lynn happily. Victoria switched a willow branch on Lynn's leg, but didn't give Lynn away.

When Shad found his voice again he said, "It's five-o-

nine. We can go on the road now, place is all locked up. Just us and the grass.” With a piece of reddish stone, he drew a starting line on the asphalt. “Race?” he said.

Lynn and Victoria had lost one race that day. They did not intend to lose another. “Race,” they agreed. They knelt at the starting line. They bounced a little to get in shape. They retied their sneakers and adjusted their socks. They breathed deeply. “On your mark,” said Victoria.

“Okay, you three,” said a deep voice.

Lynn fell right on her fanny. Was it the creep in the undershirt come to throw his Pepsi at them? Next to her face were the wheels of a car. She lifted her eyes and saw the word POLICE on the side of the car.

“What are your names, kids?”

Oh, no! Were they being arrested? What would their parents say?

Shad said in a thin voice, “Bainbridge Crosby Curtis.”

“*Bainbridge Crosby Curtis?*” said Lynn, forgetting the police. “That’s not a name, that’s a geography chapter.”

“Very funny,” said Shad.

The policeman was grinning. “Just wanted to know what to call you. Hop in the back now.”

Victoria said brightly, “I’m sorry, but we’re not allowed to ride with strangers.”

Lynn’s jaw fell open. Had *Victoria* said that? The twins exploded with giggles.

“That’s a good line, kid,” said the policeman, laughing with them. “I’ll introduce myself. I’m Officer Mason, here to escort you out of a park you know perfectly well closes at



five. Now that I'm not a stranger, get in. I'll take you to the gate and you can ride your bikes home."

They got in.

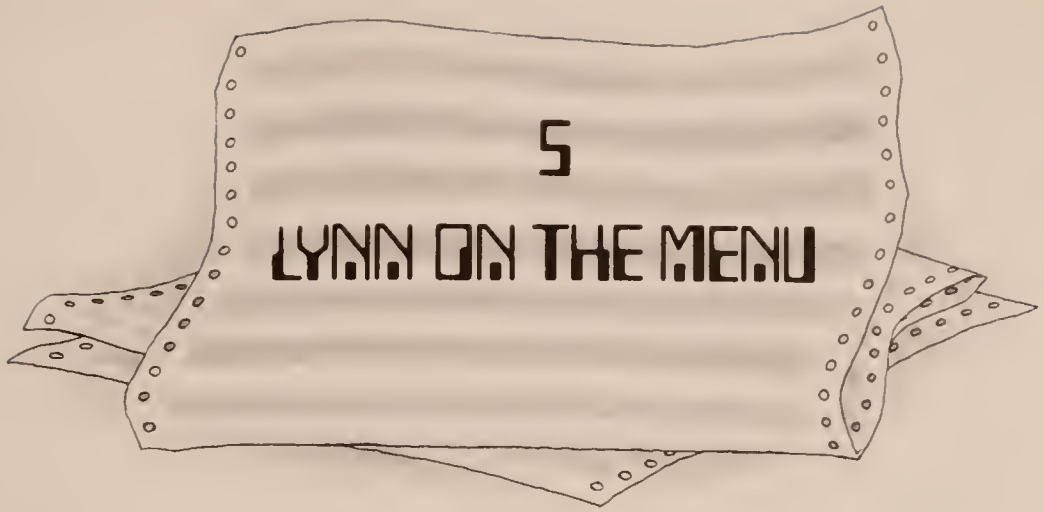
All her life Lynn had wanted to ride in a police car or an ambulance. She got up her courage and said through the grille that separated the front seat from the back, "Officer Mason? Could you use the siren?"

Shad shrank in embarrassment, but Victoria bounced twice on the back seat and yelled, "Please? Please?"

Officer Mason shook his head, but in his family, a shake must have meant yes, because the next thing the children knew, he was carooming around the park with the siren wailing. Lynn and Victoria were flung across the seat into Shad's lap, and then Shad and Lynn were flung into Victoria's. They were very disappointed when Officer Mason stopped at the park gates. "Let me give you a tip, kids," said Officer Mason.

"Sir?" said Lynn.

"Next time, use more leaves around the handlebars."



“First,” said Uncle Steve, “we turn to the menu.”

He flicked the typewriter keys and on the computer screen appeared a list of twenty-seven items. “Lynn, where do you think you’d look for the names of all the newspaper’s employees?”

I, thought Lynn, am a newspaper employee. Paper-person Greer.

She read carefully down the list. It wasn’t a menu of food but a menu of programs Uncle Steve had written for the newspaper. “There,” she said. “Personnel.”

Uncle Steve leaned over her head and typed a few numbers. The screen went black and a green question appeared. WHICH ITEM ON MENU DO YOU WANT? ENTER MENU NUMBER.

Lynn studied the keyboard. Personnel was program number eighteen. She located a one and an eight and typed them.

Instantly another question appeared on the screen. WHAT NAME DO YOU WANT TO ACCESS?

“Tell the machine the name you’re looking up,” directed Uncle Steve.

Slowly Lynn found the letters for her own name. As she typed, the letters appeared on the screen. She answered the computer’s questions and it answered hers. It was rather like having a conversation with someone very efficient. In a few moments, the screen was full of facts about Lynn Greer. Address—phone—age—number of papers—length and location of route—supplier—!

“Wow,” said Lynn. “But how did all that get into the computer?”

“I entered it, of course. Information is stored in the disk, and we have access to it by the program I wrote.”

“Access?”

“A way to get the data back. Facts aren’t any good if you can’t find them.”

“Last year we had a big social studies test,” said Lynn, “and I almost flunked it. The facts were in my brain somewhere, but I couldn’t find them.”

“Exactly,” said Uncle Steve.

“How did you get the program started?”

“I can’t show you. There is private information here, Lynn, like how much money different people get paid. That’s nobody’s business. You can’t leave a computer so that just anybody could waltz in and look up whatever he wants. You use a code to keep snoopers out.”

And you think I’m a snooper, thought Lynn, or you’d tell me the codes.

There was a quiet knock at the door. Uncle Steve let in a

small dark man with a small neat beard. He looked the way Uncle Steve might after drinking shrinking potion. "This is Mr. Forio, the owner of the *Nearing River Daily News*," said Uncle Steve.

Hello, Mario Forio, nursery rhyme, Lynn said to herself. Out loud she said, "How do you do?"

"What a lovely niece you have, Steve," said Mr. Forio.

Lynn agreed with that.

"Steve, ready to get rolling?" he asked. "I still haven't convinced Hamill that a computer is good for the paper. Let's aim for Friday and show him how useful it will be."

Her uncle nodded and said, "Lynn, run along."

Pooh, thought Lynn. We were just getting to the good part. They were going to say something rotten about Mr. Hamill.

She looked in on Aunt Camilla and Victoria, who were spraying and dusting the greenhouse plants with vile-smelling fungicides and insecticides. "Do you wish to die young, Vic," she said, "or come out and play?"

Victoria gladly trotted out of the stuffy greenhouse. "Let's go see Shad," she said. "You know where he lives?"

"No, but he comes down Redfern Road to get to Eastern. Let's hike up that way." Companionably they walked down the block.

"It's funny to be friends, isn't it?" said Victoria. "We never get along this well at home."

"Anybody who can tell a policeman she's not allowed to ride with strangers is a friend of mine." They giggled.

"Lynn!" came a scream. "Catch!" Shad was racing down

the other side of Redfern with an older boy in hot pursuit. Shad hurled something over the tops of passing cars. "I can throw," said Lynn, "but I can't catch." The package fell in a peony bed. "It's a present," said Victoria, scooping it up.

It was wrapped in tissue with sprinkles of gold and red. A glittery ribbon swooped around it. "No Scotch tape," marveled Lynn, whose gift wrapping resembled garbage on the way to the curb.

The bigger boy stopped chasing Shad and went after the girls. "What'll we do?" said Victoria. "It'll be ruined if we throw it again."

Lynn was reading the card. *Ribbons of my kisses wrap this package of my heart*, said a ballpoint pen that skipped. "Yuck," said Lynn. "Shad didn't write that."

"Must belong to the other guy," said Victoria.

"The other guy," said the other guy, seizing the package, "is Shad's older brother. Or was. Little punk. I'm going to stuff him down the nearest storm drain. How can you tease me about my girlfriend, Shad, when you've got *two* of them?"

"I don't have two girlfriends," said Shad, stung. "They're just people."

He had walked too close. His big brother tried to grab him.

"Run, Shad!" said Victoria. The three children pelted down Redfern Road. "You'd better come home with us," Lynn said. "It isn't safe at your house today."

They stopped running at the corner and walked the rest of the way. Shad had a huge wad of bubble gum in his

mouth. He ripped off chunks for the girls. “How about showing me your computer, Lynn?” he said.

Victoria laughed. “Yes, Lynn, how about showing us your computer?”

Lynn knew she didn’t understand the programs well enough to show off yet. I’m safe though, she thought. Uncle Steve’s too busy to let us in. Tonight I’ll get him to teach me enough so I really can run a program next time Shad comes over. “Sure, that’ll be fun,” said Lynn. “I’ll access the personnel file and we’ll scan the data on Bainbridge Crosby Curtis.”

“Wow,” said Shad, “wow.” Lynn thought, who wants a ribbon of kisses when she can get a *wow*?



“Who came into my office?” shouted Uncle Steve. He bounced off the walls and desks of the little room like a bullet ricocheting on a TV cop show. “I went out to lunch with Camilla and I come back and somebody’s gotten into my office! Was it one of you kids? Did you come in here, Lynn? Tell me. I’ll mail you to Antarctica!”

Lynn, Victoria, and Shad shrank back against the wallpaper. “No, sir,” said Lynn. “We didn’t, promise.” They had *planned* to come in, but they hadn’t—thank goodness—walked fast enough to beat Uncle Steve home.

Aunt Camilla bent over the file cabinets, her long dark hair swaying. “It isn’t here, Steve,” she said. “Where can it be? What can have happened?”

“Somebody stole it,” he said, “that’s what happened.”

“We forgot to lock up,” said Aunt Camilla. “It was stupid of us.”

“Stole what?” said Lynn.

“Your Uncle Steve’s program for the newspaper circulation,” said Aunt Camilla, pawing through piles of paper on



the tops of the desks. "We did a trial run for Mr. Forio this morning. It went perfectly. Your uncle called Mr. Hamill to say we can install tomorrow. Then we went out to lunch to celebrate getting the job over with."

"How could I have been so dumb?" said Uncle Steve. "I worked three months on that program. How could I have gone off leaving the disk in plain sight with the door unlocked?"

Lynn thought it most odd that anybody would steal a computer program. What would they do with it? It wasn't like stealing a color television or a silver tea set.

"Lynn," said Uncle Steve, "tell me the truth. If you hid the disk somewhere, I won't get mad. Tell me. I'll just store you in the freezer till your parents get home."

"Uncle Steve, I didn't touch anything. We were all together over on Redfern Road. Shad's older brother can testify."

He sighed and dropped onto the torn corduroy couch. Aunt Camilla sorted through the trash on the floor. Uncle Steve sifted through the stacks on the couch. Lynn tried to find the disk in the wastebasket.

The disk just wasn't in the office.

"What will you do, Uncle Steve?" said Victoria worriedly.

"I still have the flow charts," he said. "I can reconstruct. But I told Mr. Forio I'd install tomorrow. Now we'll be lucky if I can do it next week."

Shad cupped his hands over Lynn's ear. "What are flow charts?" he whispered.

“The written-down program,” she hissed. “You wouldn’t believe how long the program is in writing. And not all of it is written down. Just hints and clues to help him remember.”

“Shall I call the police?” said Aunt Camilla.

Uncle Steve sighed. “I suppose you could. But you know what they’ll say.”

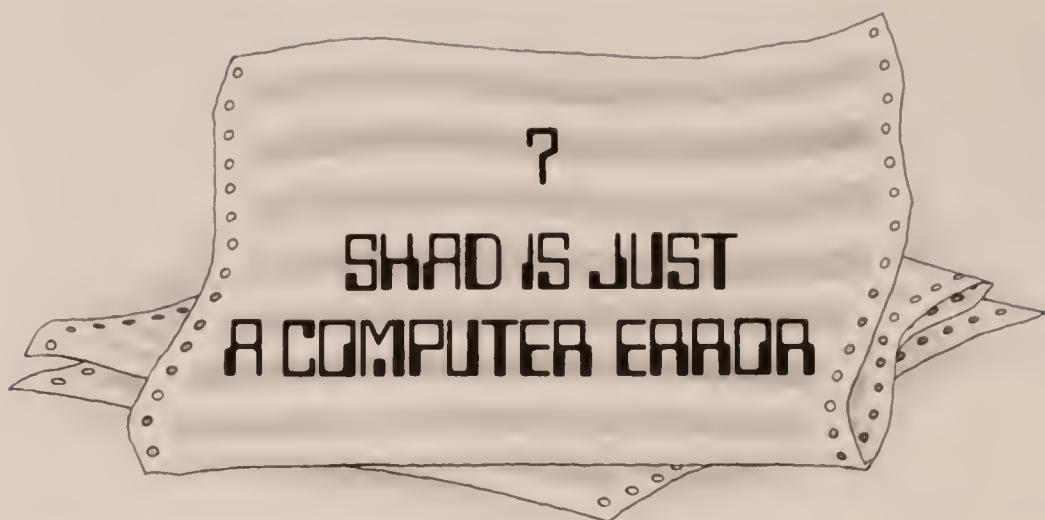
“No,” said Aunt Camilla. “I don’t.”

“They’ll make me explain what a program is and what a disk is and why anybody would want it, and why I was so stupid I left the office unlocked and—no, Camilla, let’s forget it.” Uncle Steve rubbed his hands over his wrinkled forehead and dismally sat down at the screen. From a wide drawer he pulled two huge, thick notebooks of green and white striped paper: the flow charts. “Don’t anybody bother me. Make yourselves scarce.”

He turned on the computer. Aunt Camilla picked up the room. Shad and Victoria slipped outside. Lynn lingered. Over her uncle’s shoulder she could see the flow charts clearly.

250 IF LEN (D\$) $\neq$ 8 GOTO 240, said one line.

Uncle Steve flipped back to the first page and there, in ordinary English was a list of codes. Lynn memorized one of them. Now! she thought. I can access the circulation programs.



It was a long weekend. Aunt Camilla carried trays of food in to Uncle Steve, who hunched over his computer stabbing at the keys. The girls played outdoors with Shad, delivered the papers, and stayed out of Uncle Steve's hair. Aunt Camilla called the police anyway, and they did just what Uncle Steve said they would. They said they'd look into it and went away confused. Mario Forio telephoned constantly, and after each phone call Uncle Steve was a little angrier.

Lynn almost wished her parents were back and they could go home and be away from the tension at Greer Data Systems. She had never seen Uncle Steve so upset. Mr. Forio's plans were thrown off and Mr. Hamill came in now and then snarling.

Outside, the summer sun was very hot. Too hot for bikes or ball games. Almost too hot just to lie on the grass under the trees. "But who," said Shad, "would want to steal a computer program?"

"You don't steal unless you think you will be better off,"

said Victoria. "Who would be happier or richer if he had Uncle Steve's program?"

All they could think of was the *Daily News*—but that was where the program was going in the first place. They wouldn't steal their own program, would they?

The children poked across the park to the water fountain and drank. It wasn't refreshing. It was like drinking from the bathtub.

"The disk had a label," said Victoria. "The thief knew he was taking a circulation program. He wasn't confused into believing he had a gold brick or a George Washington autograph."

Lynn kept thinking: who *would* be happier or richer if he had that program?

It was too hot to think. Her brain worked as clearly as chocolate pudding.

"Can you really run that computer, Lynn?" said Shad.

Lynn shrugged. "Sort of. One program, anyway. Personnel." Through the heat waves, she saw Shad's envy. She thought, I wish I could show off. I promised Uncle Steve, though.

"Let's look me up," begged Shad. "The way you said you would last week. Your uncle said he'd be at the paper this afternoon, trying to work some bugs out of the system. You won't be bothering him."

That's true, thought Lynn, aching to do it.

Victoria sat up fast and said, "Lynn, you'd better not."

"Uncle Steve says it's snooping," Lynn admitted. "It's trespassing on a person's privacy to look him up in a computer."

“But it’s *me* you’re looking up,” protested Shad. “It’s my privacy, and I want you to snoop on it.”

It would be fun to sit on the piano stool, swiveling a little, keeping Victoria and Shad in suspense, not letting them see how she did it. “I’m thirsty,” she said. “Let’s go home and have some soda.”

They trudged down Eastern Avenue. There weren’t many shade trees. The back of Lynn’s T-shirt was sweaty wet, and she fanned herself by flapping it. Nobody said anything more about touching the computer, but everybody was thinking about it. When they got to the house, Aunt Camilla was with three customers dithering over wind chimes and sundials. Uncle Steve’s car was gone. The children sat in the kitchen, which was dark and cool after being outdoors, and sipped soda. The carbonated drinks popped pleasantly in their dry throats.

Lynn said, “Well. We could just go in and look.”

They walked down the hall, past the bedrooms, and opened the door to Uncle Steve’s office. The blinds were pulled and it was musty and very, very hot. The outside door was locked and bolted. Lynn turned on the fluorescent light overhead and seated herself at the computer.

“Lynn, you shouldn’t,” said Victoria.

“I won’t fool around, I know what I’m doing.” She turned on the computer. She thought, I’ll quick look up Shad and then turn it off and leave and Uncle Steve will never know we were here.

Victoria said, “I’m leaving.” But she didn’t.

Lynn typed the access code in the right order. When the



computer asked which file Lynn wanted, she typed 18. The personnel file was open. Lynn typed BAINBRIDGE CROSBY CURTIS. Shad grinned when his name appeared in green letters on the screen.

Almost instantly the machine said, NO SUCH EMPLOYEE. RETYPE IN CASE OF ERROR.

"I am not an error," said Shad huffily. "Retype me, Lynn."

"Serves you right for calling us whatevers," Lynn told him. She typed his name again. Again the computer rejected it.

"Maybe it's under Shad," said Victoria.

SHAD CURTIS, Lynn typed. Nothing. She tried CURTIS, SHAD and then CURTIS, BAINBRIDGE CROSBY. NO SUCH EMPLOYEE. RETYPE IN CASE OF ERROR, answered the computer. "Uncle Steve said every single delivery person is in the file," said Lynn, puzzled. "What's your supplier's name?"

"Grant. He's Mr. Hamill's cousin. He has to be in there. He has about forty paperboys on his route."

The twins glared at him.

"And papergirls," he added.

"Thank you." Lynn typed GRANT.

"Mr. Grant couldn't have forgotten to give the newspaper my name," said Shad, "because I've been with him longer than anybody else on his string. Four years."

"Four years? Who would want to do the same old thing for four whole years?" demanded Victoria.

"I've had a route since I was eight," said Shad. He waved

his digital watch. "Bought this and a radio and a bike and ball game series tickets and—"

The computer rejected the name GRANT, too.

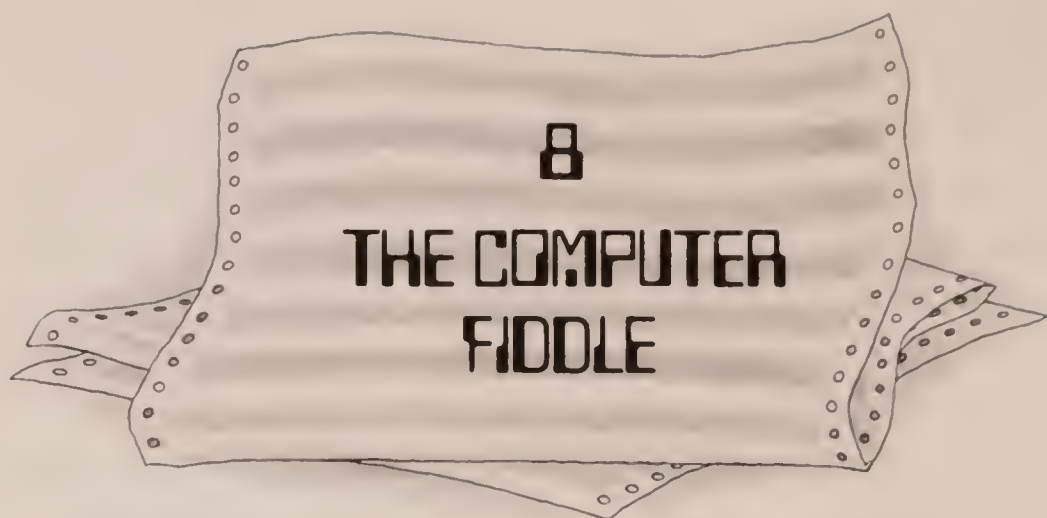
"Maybe that's one of the bugs your uncle mentioned," suggested Shad. "There's something wrong with the program and—"

"There's nothing wrong with my Uncle Steve's program," said Victoria icily.

Lynn was frowning. She knew she was using the computer correctly. "Who are some of the other kids who have routes with Mr. Grant?"

Shad gave her a long list. She tried them all. The computer had no records on Dick Thompson. None on Tom Kovach, P. M. Rose, or Donna Dominic. "Heck," said Shad. "You don't know what you're doing. I'm getting out of here before your uncle comes home and we all get in trouble. Come on, Vic." He and Victoria went back into the house, flicking off the lights to be mean.

Lynn sat in the darkness and stared at the green letters on the screen, thinking and thinking.



The thing is, Lynn thought the next day, I can't ask the right questions without having Uncle Steve find out I've been fiddling with his computer. I promised him faithfully I'd never do such a thing. If I have to admit I walked in *the very next day* and went into the personnel files with an access code I'm not supposed to have—!

I'm bad, thought Lynn. No wonder my parents would rather be childless in England.

The house was very quiet. Victoria was in the den watching a soap opera she followed every summer. Aunt Camilla was in her greenhouse. Uncle Steve was working hard in his office. The drapes and blinds were pulled to keep out the hot sun, and the whole place had a musty, hot feel. Two small window air conditioners puffed heavily at each end of the house, like beginning joggers about to faint.

Lynn fixed a lunch tray for her uncle. Sliced melon, ham sandwiches, pickles, potato chips and a Coke. She carried it into the office and cleared a space for it on a table. "Uncle

Steve,” she said, “do you have every one of the paperboys in your data files? Is that list completely up to date?”

“I do and it is,” said Uncle Steve, cramming half a ham sandwich into his mouth and going right on typing. His cheeks squirreled out underneath the beard. “Good lunch. Thanks.”

“Who gave you the list of paperboys?” Lynn said. She poured Coke fizzily over ice cubes and handed the glass to her uncle.

“Mr. Hamill, of course. He’s in charge of circulation, isn’t he?”

Lynn had done some arithmetic yesterday. She earned three cents a paper. The customer paid fifteen cents. That left twelve cents that Lynn turned in to her supplier. The supplier paid five cents to the newspaper which left him with a seven cent profit. Seven cents wasn’t enough to buy anybody anything. Not even half a candy bar. Not even a third of a candy bar.

“Does Mr. Hamill tell the press room how many papers to print?” she said.

“Of course he does,” said Uncle Steve, “that’s his job. Lynn, I’m sorry to be short with you. I’m all bent out of shape over that disk being stolen. Buzz off and let me work, okay?”

“Okay.” Lynn carried the tray back to the kitchen. With a Magic Marker on a paper napkin she did some more figuring.

Shad had told her there were forty paperboys and girls on Mr. Grant’s supply route. Lynn had ninety-eight papers, Shad one-hundred-eleven.

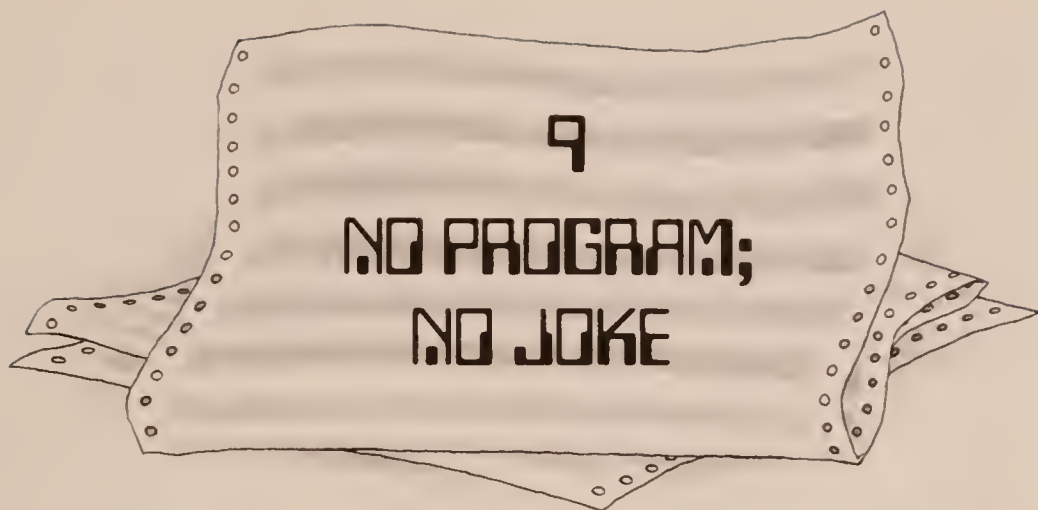
“One hundred is easy to multiply with,” Lynn said to herself. “So I’ll say that each of those forty paperpersons delivers one hundred papers every day. Seven cents is what Mr. Grant gets. Seven cents times forty paperpersons times one hundred papers each is \$280.00. So Mr. Grant is earning \$280 a day times 365 days. That’s—” She made mistakes with the Magic Marker and started in on another napkin. “\$102,200.00.” Lynn was astonished. A little tiny seven cents that couldn’t buy a candy bar.

She perched on the kitchen counter to think better, with her legs swinging. “Isn’t it wonderful what can happen to seven cents?” she said. “Over a hundred thousand dollars!” She drummed her heels slowly on the cabinets and sipped Coke and looked out the kitchen window at the quiet street.

She knew exactly why the program had been stolen. She knew who had stolen it, too.

You laughed at people who were afraid a computer might put them out of work, Uncle Steve, thought Lynn. It wasn’t funny. Your program will put two people out of an awful lot of money. But if I tell you what I’ve guessed, you’ll know I’ve been fiddling with your computer. You’ll never trust me again. You’ll know I’m sneaky and I lie. You’ll tell my mother and father and ruin their trip and my summer and—

And what’ll I do? thought Lynn.



Uncle Steve spent the rest of the afternoon at the paper. They had baloney sandwiches for supper and sat around feeling tired and grumpy. "I'm so tired," said Uncle Steve. "Let's do something pleasant tonight."

"Roller skating!" said Victoria.

"Something pleasant," said Aunt Camilla, "means something sitting down."

"I almost always sit down when I roller-skate," said Victoria.

Uncle Steve laughed. "I hate sitting on the rink, though, with everybody laughing at me. How about a movie? Hot buttered popcorn and lots of laughs?"

"They don't use butter," said Victoria, "they just squirt on yellow grease."

"I want to go to the movies, even if there's yellow grease on my popcorn," said Uncle Steve. "Everybody want to go?"

"Yes," said Aunt Camilla and Victoria. "No," said Lynn.

"No?" said her uncle. "Are you feeling sick, Lynn?"

She was feeling bad. Bad that she had used the compu-

ter, bad that she had lied to Uncle Steve, and bad about Mr. Grant and Mr. Hamill. "Yes, I have a headache."

Uncle Steve and Aunt Camilla finally decided that Lynn's parents wouldn't be mad at them for leaving Lynn at home with a headache while everybody else went to the movies. "Lock after us," called her uncle. "Bye," said Victoria. "I'll bring you popcorn."

Lynn locked the kitchen door and perched on the counter again, checking her arithmetic. After a while she went into Uncle Steve's office and borrowed his pocket calculator. She hadn't made any mistakes on her napkin.

A yellow van with bubble windows drove up and parked in front of the house. Oh, no, thought Lynn, they're going to steal it *again*!

For a moment Lynn could not move. She was stuck to the counter. Only her heart leaped. Then she threw herself across the kitchen, reaching the telephone in two giant steps. With shaking fingers she dialed the number pasted on the receiver handle. Seven numbers had never taken so long to do.

"Police."

"May I speak to Officer Mason?"

"Just going out the door," said the voice.

"Catch him please!" Through the window she saw that Mr. Grant and Mr. Hamill were halfway across the lawn. They looked very much alike. Cousins, Shad had told her. The telephone was silent. Then, "Officer Mason here."

"This is Lynn Greer. Remember you took us around the park with your sirens on last week?"

"Sure. You were the one who didn't ride with strangers."

“That was my twin. This is me. Please come over to my uncle’s house, Officer Mason. We’re in trouble. Hurry!”

“Lynn, is this a practical joke?”

“No, no! It’s about the computer. The stolen disk.” Lynn could no longer see the men. Faintly she heard them on the steps by the office door. “Greer Data Systems!” she cried. “Hurry!”

“A stolen what?” said Officer Mason. “What’s this about computers?”

Lynn could not stay to explain. She rushed down the stuffy hall and burst through the door into the office to be sure it was bolted . . . Mr. Hamill and Mr. Grant had already let themselves into the empty room.

“How did you get in?” said Lynn. “The door was locked.”

They were horrified to see her. “You’re the niece,” said Mr. Hamill. “Didn’t you all go to the movies? When he was at the newspaper this afternoon, he said he wanted to take everybody out to the movies.”

“I don’t like movies. I’ll tell him you came by.” Lynn tried to show them out. “Good-bye.”

They didn’t leave. They looked around the office. Lynn thought, this time they’ll take the disks *and* the flow charts. When Uncle Steve can’t install the program by the second deadline, Mr. Forio will just shrug and give up on ever having computers. He’ll say, it’s easier the old way. He’ll cancel Uncle Steve’s contract. We’ll be broke and Mr. Hamill and Mr. Grant will be safe. “How did you get in?” she said again.

“The door was open,” said Mr. Grant. He gave Lynn a



peculiar look, and she realized with a sick taste in her mouth that she had forgotten to tell Officer Mason the address. Even if he wanted to help her, he wouldn't know where to look. "It's no good searching here," said Lynn. "There's nothing here but trash. My uncle left the program at the newspaper." Actually the disk was on the couch, covering the split places. The flow charts were on Uncle Steve's piano stool.

"Looking?" said Mr. Grant. "For what?" He lit a cigarette and strolled around the room as if he were in a park. It wasn't easy because of all the crumpled paper he had to wade through.

Lynn thought, if I tell them I know what they've done, they'll give up and leave. "I figured out what you two did," she said. "I'm going to tell Uncle Steve, and he'll tell Mr. Forio, so you'd better get out."

Mr. Hamill said, "What are you talking about, little girl?"

"I know that once the computer circulation program is installed, it will order the printers to print thirty thousand papers each day. But for at least four years, you've been printing four thousand *more* every day. Four thousand Mr. Forio doesn't even know about. If you paid for those papers, you'd earn seven cents a paper. But you don't pay for them. You steal them, and after you pay the paperboys, you get twelve cents a paper. I worked it all out with a Magic Marker on a napkin. If you were honest, you'd have made a hundred thousand dollars a year. This way, you're earning a hundred seventy-five thousand dollars a year.

That's practically three quarters of a million dollars you've stolen so far from the *Nearing River Daily News*."

They gaped at her.

Lynn said, "You didn't dare let my uncle's program run. The very first day, there'd be 4,000 people and forty paperboys without newspapers. They'd all telephone the newspaper to find out why. Mr. Forio would figure out right then that you two have been stealing."

Mr. Hamill said, "You haven't told your uncle this, Lynn?"

"You thought if you stole the disk you'd be safe," she said. She could tell by their expressions that she was right about everything. I may not know my nine tables very well, Lynn thought, and I can't multiply anything by twelve, but I'm *smart*. "You thought it would take Uncle Steve months to rewrite the program. Now you've come back to get the flow charts as well, haven't you?"

Hamill and his cousin looked at each other. "What'll we do?" said Mr. Grant nervously.

Lynn was very pleased with herself.

Mr. Hamill began looking at Lynn again, and suddenly Lynn was afraid. She was between them and—and what? Money. Mr. Forio. Jail. They were angry and they were dangerous.

Oh, no! thought Lynn, her heart beginning to shiver in her chest. What'll I do? And I thought I was so smart.

She turned to run out of Uncle Steve's office. The quiet night was split by wailing sirens, coming closer and closer.

Officer Mason had decided Lynn's telephone call was no joke.



Victoria said, "I will never *never* NEVER forgive you for not telling me. Letting me go see some two hour soap opera and eat stale popcorn, while you helped arrest two thieves."

"I thought you liked soap operas," said Lynn.

"I'd rather be in a soap opera than see one," said Victoria. "Weren't you scared?"

"Nope."

"I was," said Aunt Camilla. "I've never been so scared. We drove up to the house after a nice relaxing movie, and there were three police cars with their blue lights flashing."

Officer Mason plopped down tiredly on the old office couch. He sank right into the stuffing of the torn place. "The day your Aunt Camilla called about the disk being stolen, Lynn," he said, "we had no idea why anyone might want to take that. When you phoned the station, I remembered that theft and figured out who you were and what the address was. But it took *you* to solve the mystery of why

the disk was stolen. You're really something, Lynn."

Lynn beamed and strutted.

"Before we make you Papergirl of the Year," said Uncle Steve, "there's still the problem of you sneaking in here and playing with my computer when you agreed not to." Under his beard was a glare.

Victoria tried to rescue her twin. "Maybe we should all go to bed now and get a good night's rest."

"Rest?" said Aunt Camilla. "Is that allowed in Lynn's house?"

Lynn said, "I'm sorry, Uncle Steve. I knew I was wrong. I was showing off to Shad and I knew I shouldn't and Vic told me I shouldn't and I did it anyway. I just accidentally discovered what Mr. Hamill and Mr. Grant were doing."

"It's all right to use my things," said Uncle Steve, "but it's not all right to sneak." Everybody was silent for a minute, and Lynn felt awful, being scolded in front of Officer Mason and neat little Mr. Forio. Then Mr. Forio thanked her, and Uncle Steve hugged her, and Victoria said, "Next time I'm going to stay home with Lynn. We'll *both* get in trouble figuring out things."

Uncle Steve said, "I brought home a bag of greasy yellow popcorn. Why don't you two go to bed and talk and get popcorn all over the sheets, and maybe even fall asleep?"

"Never," said Lynn. "We're going to plot. We have one more week here. We don't want it to be boring, do we, Vic?"

Aunt Camilla and Uncle Steve laughed. "We weren't worried about having a boring, restful week," they said. "Not with you around."

About the Author

CAROLINE B. COONEY grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, but has been a transplanted Southerner since 1971. Along with writing, music—particularly that of J. S. Bach—is one of her greatest loves. She is the author of *Safe as the Grave*.

Mrs. Cooney and her husband, who is a computer expert, live with their three children in High Point, North Carolina.

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GAIL OWENS, a native of Detroit, Michigan, now makes her home in Rock Tavern, New York. She has worked as a designer, an art director and an illustrator. Ms. Owens's illustrating credits include *Safe as the Grave*, Caroline B. Cooney's first book for Coward, *Witch Water*, *Witch's Sister* and *The Witch Herself* by Phyllis Reynolds Naylor and *Julia and the Hand of God* by Eleanor Cameron.

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Cooney, Caroline B.

The paper caper

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CAROLINE B. COONEY grew up in Greenwich, Connecticut, but has been a transplanted Southerner since 1971. Along with writing, music—particularly that of J. S. Bach—is one of her greatest loves. She is the author of *Safe as the Grave*.

Mrs. Cooney and her husband, who is a computer expert, live with their three children in High Point, North Carolina.

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